**Human Rights Council 21st Session**

**Side Event-**

**High Level Launch of**

**“Technical Guidance on the application of a human rights-based approach to the implementation of policies and programmes to reduce preventable maternal mortality and morbidity”**

**Statement by**

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**Check against Delivery**

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Madam High Commissioner

Distinguished Panelists

Excellencies

Ladies and Gentlemen

I am honored to take part in the official launch of the technical guidance on a human rights based approach to reduce maternal mortality and morbidity, along with my dear colleagues and friend High Commissioner Navi Pillay.

I would like to congratulate the High Commissioner and her entire team at the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights for their leadership and dedication to this critical issue.

May I also congratulate all the experts, especially Dr. Alicia Yamin, and others involved, on their invaluable contributions. UNFPA was honored to be part of the process of producing the guidance, and we are fully committed to support Member States in implementing it.

The Human Rights Council – and in particular Burkina Faso, Colombia and New Zealand as co-sponsoring States – deserves great credit for its clear-sighted resolutions, which declare explicitly and unambiguously that maternal death and disability are not only public health concerns, but predominantly result from denial of human rights.

The work of the Council has paved the way for international policy coherence on this important matter. We have recently seen landmark resolutions on elimination of preventable maternal death at the Commission on the Status of Women, as well as on access to sexual and reproductive health of adolescents and youth, at the Commission on Population and Development, both in 2012.

This firm political consensus has made it clear that maternal death and disability are the tragic consequences of depriving women and girls of their human rights, including the right to the highest attainable standard of sexual and reproductive health, and the right to decide if, when and how often to reproduce, free of discrimination, coercion and violence.

The current political momentum emphasizes the timeliness of this technical guidance. With its endorsement, the Human Rights Council sends out an unequivocal message: maternal death and disability is a human rights issue. The question now is how national law and policy can improve maternal health, and with it the lives, health and human potential of millions of women and girls.

After years of operational experience, we at UNFPA know the impact of stronger health systems and the cost-effectiveness of key interventions such as universal access to voluntary family planning information, goods and services. We also know that countries cannot achieve much, or sustain their achievements, unless there is a genuine political will to succeed. Success demands that the life, health and rights of women are not subordinated to ideological and cultural considerations; it demands equal protection for the rights of women and girls in pockets of exclusion and marginalization, through their effective empowerment as active agents of change; and finally, it calls for accountability at national and international level. Accountability mechanisms, including those for policymaking, should be equally accessible to disadvantaged women, because no real change will take place in their lives unless they themselves demand it.

While the focus of international cooperation is on supporting least-developed countries, the disaggregated data reveal high rates of preventable maternal death in many other countries, for example among the very poor and among women who are part of indigenous groups, ethnic minorities, and irregular migrants. These discrepancies suggest that gender inequality, compounded by multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination, is a global challenge, with terrible consequences for the health and lives of millions of women and girls.

The technical guidance reminds us that the international human rights framework is flexible enough to adapt to specific country contexts, cultures and environments; lays out the principles that national legal frameworks should reflect, and suggests actions for policymakers to consider.

The technical guidance calls for an integrated approach to sexual and reproductive health – a comprehensive package of accessible, acceptable and high-quality sexual and reproductive health services. Services addressing underlying determinants of health, such as sexuality education, should be made available through formal education and informal channels.

UNFPA supports countries with high rates of maternal death and disability to develop national capacity in four key areas: family planning; emergency obstetric and newborn care; human resources, particularly midwifery staff, and the prevention and treatment of obstetric fistula. In less than four years and with cumulative expenditures of $60 million, UNFPA’s Maternal Health Thematic Fund has achieved impressive results.

The human rights approach also makes clear that reducing maternal death and disability is a national development priority, bringing the health sector together with ministries of finance, women, education, information, employment and justice, as well as parliament and civil society. National human rights advocates; indigenous peoples’ organizations; faith-based institutions, and community leaders all help to build the framework of sexual and reproductive health and reproductive rights, gender equality and the empowerment of women.

For women to take an active part in exercising their human right to maternal health – as opposed to being passive beneficiaries of health services – they need an equal status in society, in law and in practice. This calls for societies’ commitment to fight gender-based violence, child marriage and other practices harming the integrity and well-being of women.

Pregnancy and childbirth are the leading cause of death of women under 18. Yet, child marriage is still tolerated in many parts of the world: every year more than 14 million adolescent girls are married, many of whom have little understanding of sex or reproduction. Many become pregnant before their bodies are mature. The consequences include complications of pregnancy and delivery, and horrific birth injuries such as obstetric fistula. Child marriage has generational consequences too: it disrupts girls’ schooling, limits their economic opportunities, perpetuates the low status of women, and contributes to continuing extreme poverty.

UNFPA, therefore, promotes legal reform to ensure compliance with CEDAW and other human rights treaties. UNFPA-supported programmes raise young people’s human rights awareness to empower them to exercise control over their sexual and reproductive lives and to become active participants in development. UNFPA helps to remove legal and practical barriers preventing young people’s access to quality sexual and reproductive health information, goods and services. At the same time, we at UNFPA emphasize the need to build cultural legitimacy for human rights principles so that communities can take ownership. We can show very clear successes in this area, for example in programmes to eradicate female genital mutilation and cutting.

A human rights-based approach to maternal death requires a higher level of commitment and accountability on the part of all concerned. Of course, accountability can be uncomfortable and inconvenient – but it can save lives. The technical guidance provides many avenues for accountability; it highlights in particular the planning process, which builds political buy-in through enhanced social participation and encourages corrective action through feedback on policy effectiveness.

In line with the principle of accountability, UNFPA programming prioritizes surveillance and response as one of the key strategies to reduce maternal death and disability.

Ladies and gentlemen,

However rich its content, this technical guidance will be meaningless unless it is implemented. In UNFPA, we intend to use this guidance, in accordance with our mandate, to accelerate and sustain national efforts towards MDG 5 on maternal health. We believe that it will help to draw lessons and identify gaps in the current MDG framework, to inform post-2015 planning, so that development and human rights, including the reproductive rights of women and girls, go hand-in-hand.

The international community reached consensus on this question 18 years ago, at the International Conference on Population and Development. As we begin the global review of the ICPD Programme of Action in 2014, lessons from this technical guidance will inform the process, and shape UNFPA’s vision and mandate in the years to come.

We are firmly convinced that this technical guidance can make a real difference in the lives, well-being and choices of women and girls worldwide. In partnership with OHCHR and our sister UN agencies, including WHO and UNICEF, we stand ready to support member states to the utmost of our ability.

Thank you.